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ABSTRACT

Reading research over the past 50 years seems to have produced little useful information for classroom teachers. This does not imply that nothing of importance has been accomplished, but does indicate that communication barriers exist. One major impediment to progress is the lack of understanding by classroom teachers as to what research is all about. Another difficulty is devising ways to effectively bridge the communication gap so that the findings of research may be formulated into practical classroom methods and materials. If research is to have a more direct impact in the classroom, teachers should be asked where they think the focus should be in the next ten years. Much of this future research will have to be conducted in the schools with real students if it is to have value. The schools, classroom teachers, and researchers must work together to develop appropriate strategies to implement research which will be valid as well as useful for students. (TO)

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READING RESEARCH: THE STATE OF THE ART AS IT REACHES THE CLASSROOM

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READING RESEARCH: THE STATE OF THE ART AS IT REACHES THE CLASSROOM

In an effort to establish priorities in reading research, the International Reading Association began, in 1972, a series of interdisciplinary reading seminars under the direction of Dr. Stanley Wanat. Participants at the University of California, Santa Cruz included theorists, researchers, and practitioners from the elementary to the college level. Lectures and seminars were presented by highly qualified people in the areas of perception, cognition, psycholinguistics and components of the reading process. In 1973, the second IRA seminar was held in the Linguistics Department of Georgetown University. Again a group composed of participants drawn from a variety of educational backgrounds met for three weeks and endeavored to continue the previous years work as well as to develop a model curricula for the training of teachers.

One of the major assets of the seminars was the opportunity provided for informal interaction among the participants and the resource personnel. Through this experience, it was possible for the elementary school reading specialist to examine two aspects of the research question: (1) It permitted them to see the necessities and disciplines of what the theorists were trying to do, and (2) it provided the teachers with an opportunity to relate the research to classroom needs.

The discovery was made that the two groups were looking at the reading problem from different perspectives and different priorities. The theorists are trying to discover how children develop the intricate processes required to read while the classroom teachers want to know

why many pupils are not learning to read.

Hundreds of research studies are completed every year but one can seriously question whether this research is making any difference in the classroom. Rather than decreasing, the number of chronically disabled readers who are destined to live in the educational garden of reverses is increasing. Teachers will not deny that the study of eye movements, syntax, transformational grammar, language acquisition, dialect readers, and theorectical models and processes of reading have value, however they fail to see how it is applicable to the classroom so that changes can be effected in teaching techniques. If teachers were presented an opportunity to select channels for immediate research, these areas would not be allocated top priority.

It appears to teachers that either the most important questions are not being examined or that research findings are not reaching those people who are in a position to create change. So far the 70's have not produced research that is any more productive than the 60's because the reading test scores continue to decline. Once it was believed that if enough reading specialists were employed by a school system, reading problems would diminish but the opposite is happening.

One cannot state that there has been no change in the teaching of reading since the turn of the century for teachers no longer adhere to principles such as: a child can learn only one new word a day (Laine), inefficient oral readers would improve if given appropriate breathing exercises (Gray), children should not be given books to read before the age of seven (Hardy), or during the primary period, the child has little need for silent reading because he is not able to comprehend any faster than he can read orally (Gray). The influence of the home

was also considered in the early 1900's for it was suggested that teachers should go to the homes of poor readers, question if parents were reading to their children and if so, tell them to stop because it was most detrimental to the childrens' progress (Gray), or that lack of concentration could be cured by stricter house rules (Uhl).

Changes in these beliefs may have evolved from common sense rather than research but even then other questions were being asked in the areas of oral versus silent reading; whether to teach long or short vowels first; how eye movements effect reading; and why some children appear to learn slowly and forget so easily.

Unlike the field of medical research which has an occasional earth shattering breakthrough, reading research appears to plod quietly along and is accused of placing old wine in new bottles. Indeed research over the past fifty years seems to have produced little useful information for classroom teachers. This does not imply that nothing of importance has been accomplished but indicates communication barriers must exist. One major impediment to progress is the lack of understanding by classroom teachers as to what research is all about while another pressing issue is how to devise ways to effectively bridge the communication gap so that the findings of research may be formulated into practical classroom methods and materials. These two problems will have to be attacked if research is to have value.

Teachers should become familiar with the value of research through college, educational journals, textbooks, conventions and active involvement with experimentation for the more alternatives they have to handle problem readers, the better equipped they will be. However, research is not sufficiently reaching teachers through these channels.

The average college student has had little acquaintance with

research and one can ponder about how much is being analyzed by the college professors. Prior to coming to this conference, I asked several professors who are actively involved in training future teachers of reading where they thought reading research should be directed in the next ten years and received not one idea.

Research findings are readily available through the auspices of ERIC although few teachers are aware of this excellent resource. Another method of introducing teachers to new ideas is through the use of research journals. Unfortunately, leaving copies of these journals and magazines such as The Reading Teacher in the library or the teachers' room is often futile as they are seldom scanned unless it is to glance at adds for materials.

If most colleges and classroom teachers are not attempting to examine the research findings, possibly speakers at state reading and teachers' conventions should discuss the vital issues. Rather than spending time commenting on ditto sheets, learning kits, and why the child's home environment ought to be changed, speakers might utilize a portion of their time discussing such work as Goodman's miscue analysis or J. Samuel's research on how a child best perceives differentiation in symbols. Teacher conventions could provide a prominent link in reporting research but they too apparently are failing.

Research findings appear to play no direct part in influencing the expenditure of school funds in the reading departments. Millions of dollars are spent annually on hardware when much of it is of questionable value, especially with the problem learners (McLean). The Federal Government provides for the purchase of learning equipment under Title I and Title III and as a result more reading hardware, which is impressive to see, although not particularly functional, is being

poured into classrooms each year.

Books dealing with reading problems are also failing to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Reference books purporting to provide information about reading failures either present a group of unrelated articles or typically devote eighty percent of their pages to diagnosis and twenty percent to remediation. Actually the cart is leading the horse because a reference book of value to the classroom teacher, should be eighty percent remediation.

If research is going to have a more direct impact in the classroom, teachers should be questioned about where they believe some phases of it should be focused during the next ten years. Currently the educational emphasis in many states is on pupils who are being classified as learning disabled. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts will attempt this fall to provide special educational programs for all pupils between the ages of three and twenty-one who have unique learning needs.

After being evaluated by a core team, these pupils are to have individualized programs but at no time can they be labeled dyslexic, deaf, blind, retarded, emotionally disturbed, neurologically impaired or handicapped. This is certainly an improvement over past practices, however, it has placed a tremendous burden on the teachers who are traditionally blamed for pupil failure. The most promising aspect of this dilemma is that teachers finally are beginning to realize that they need assistance in solving pupils' learning problems.

From the reading teachers point of view, the problems to be encountered are enormous. We know the pupils have deficiencies, they have been diagnosed by multiple specialists--but if teachers are having difficulty meeting the academic needs of average students, how

then shall they effectively teach these pupils who may be slow, average, or very bright but apparently have conditions which disrupt the normal reading process?

Now has come the time when theorists and practitioners should work together as a team to create projects which just might make a big difference in the reading field. If techniques can be developed to meet the needs of some of these special pupils with chronic learning problems, it would appear logical that a portion of the findings would be applicable to the rest of the school population.

Much of this future research will have to be conducted in the schools with elementary grade subjects if it is to have value. An analysis of research journals, dissertation abstracts and talks with researchers at the IRA seminars reveals that the average research project is not conducted with subjects in normal classroom situations. Many researchers are trying to determine the intricacies of how pupils learn to read by either studying college students, who certainly represent an elite group, or by removing children to an unnatural school setting.

Researchers give as reasons for this that there are too many interruptions in the classroom, lack of teacher cooperation, the project would take too long, or it might be difficult to establish adequate controls. Perhaps they have forgotten that children usually learn to read around musical extravaganzas, fire drills, chicken pox and a whole variety of disturbances such as blaring public address systems and assorted school bells. Therefore, researchers need to adapt their programs to real schools rather than have the schools adapt to staged research.

The schools, classroom teachers and researchers must work together in order to develop appropriate strategies to implement research which

will be valid as well as useful in the schools. We cannot expect to prevent all reading deficits but ask for continued work in the areas of cognition, learning patterns, perception, memory and the effects of maturation with both efficient readers and those with special learning problems.

In order to achieve the goal of excellence in reading, teachers need to have a variety of appropriate methods and materials to meet classroom problems. The most challenging pupils that teachers encounter are those with erratic learning patterns such as: (1) students who reach a plateau after learning for several weeks; (2) pupils who efficiently use blends or vowels for a month then have some of these skills gradually disappear; (3) children who appear to hit a short circuit as they read simple material at ten o'clock but are incapable of reading a half hour later; (4) students with average potential who have been in school three years and still cannot read although they may successfully spell and do math; (5) pupils who can write words on the board but are incapable of reading them; and (6) students who require medication but it is administered sporadically so that they manifest learning patterns of peaks and valleys.

Pupils who demonstrate these learning patterns do not respond to a one-shot diagnosis and the much recommended technique of test, teach, post-test just does not work. Teachers desire better methods to group instruct some of these pupils because they are not satisfied with the all too frequent solution that they require one-to-one attention.

Students categorized as having poor visual perception skills have great difficulty learning to read but materials designed to aid them in discriminating between a figure and its background have apparently not been effective in improving reading. Many Massachusetts parents are trying to hurdle this reading barrier by taking children to

optometrists for visual tracking and directional orientation exercises. Research is vital in this area to determine if there is any value to this expensive technique.

The manner in which a child best processes information must be considered when organizing a suitable program for a disabled reader but it seems highly improbable that he could survive in today's schools as just a visual or an auditory learner. These classifications are sometimes given to pupils by learning disabilities teachers and psychologists but classroom teachers frequently feel inadequate to teach pupils falling into these categories. The challenge to researchers here is to determine if efficient readers also have these deficits which have been overcome by their own alternate methods or maturation.

Rather than treat the patient, teachers desire preventative medication in the form of early diagnosis. The most productive research could be in the creation of a battery of easy-to-administer screening tests which would help identify potentially high risk pupils as there appears to be a direct relationship between early diagnosis and later performance. Regardless of the amount of subsequent clinical instruction, better reading results are produced after early identification as the red warning flags are raised (Book, Muehl, Pikulaski).

Except for good predictive testing devices, reading teachers do not feel the need for creating more tests. When classroom teachers refer pupils to reading specialists, the students do not require a multitude of tests to show themselves what failures they are.

Teachers do not anticipate that all reading deficits can be prevented but they ask for research which is well-designed, with appropriate follow-up evaluation, so that they will have a variety of strategies for meeting classroom problems. They are disturbed to

read the innuendos of the media that the heart of the reading dilemma is all teacher inadequacy. Reading problems of the second generation television age are increasing at an alarming rate in the first two grades and perhaps the most valuable research of all would be that which would endeavor to find out why.

Children with reading disabilities are there and they will not disappear until appropriate diagnostic tools and techniques are developed. If reading research is going to have spin-off benefits in the classroom, a shot gun approach involving theorists, researchers, colleges, teachers and the media is essential. Excellence in reading is an attainable goal but it is imperative that much of the classroom research design be altered and that the communication barrier be overcome.

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